DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 345 CS 510 952

AUTHOR	Weiss, Suzanne
TITLE	Reading.
INSTITUTION	Education Commission of the States, Denver, CO.
SPONS AGENCY	GE Fund, Fairfield, CT.
PUB DATE	1999-11-00
NOTE	6p.; Published bimonthly.
AVAILABLE FROM	Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St., #2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427. Tel: 303-299-3600; Fax: 303-296-8332; e-mail: ecs@ecs.org. For full text: http://www.ecs.org.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001; v1 n4 Nov-Dec 1999
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Techniques; Educational Change; Elementary Education; *Instructional Effectiveness; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Instruction; *Reading Skills; Teacher Role; Tutoring
IDENTIFIERS	*Connecticut

ABSTRACT

Research shows that children who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade perform poorly in other subjects and have difficulties throughout the course of their schooling. The knowledge exists to teach all but a small percentage of students to become proficient readers. Despite this knowledge, a troubling number of children do not learn to read fluently enough to enjoy or engage in independent reading. This issue of the "Progress of Education Reform" is designed to provide state policymakers with a concise overview of these and other crucial questions related to improving student reading achievement. The article covers the following questions: How well are students reading? What accounts for Connecticut's success in improving student reading skills? What should teachers of reading know and be able to do? What can volunteer tutors contribute? and What can and should policymakers do? (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 464 345

The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001
Reading.

Suzanne Weiss.

S. F. Walker

1

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

- This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
- Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
- Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CS 510 952

The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001

Reading

Vol. 1, No. 4, November-December 1999

What's inside

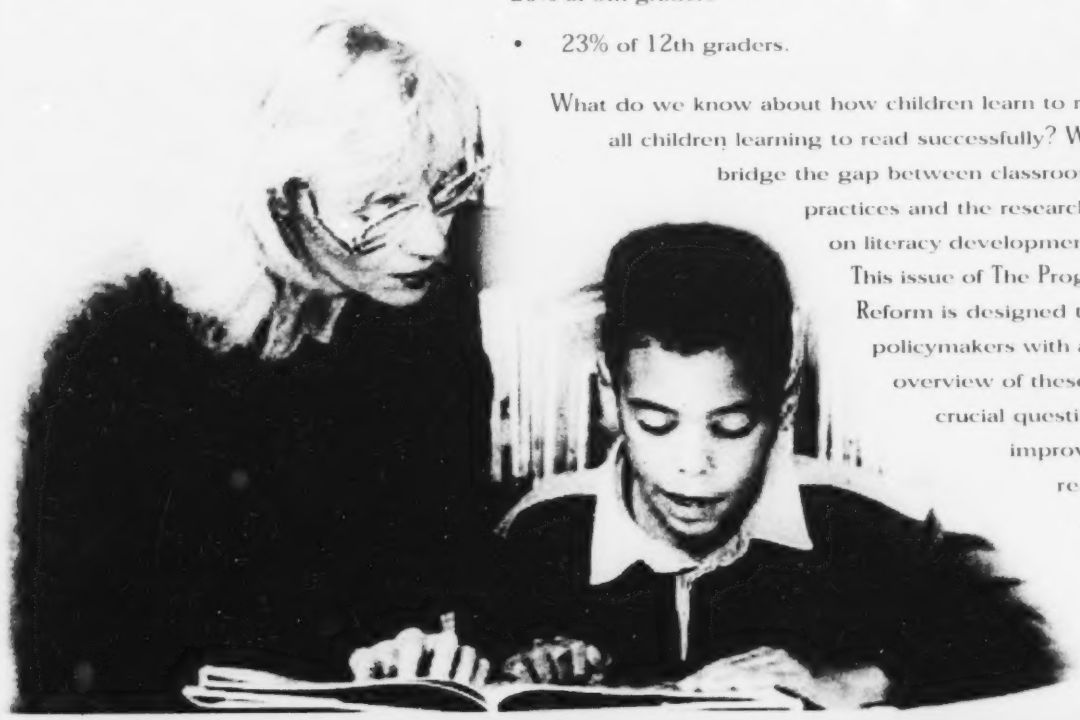
- How well are students reading?
- What teaching techniques work best?
- What can policymakers do?

Improving student reading skills

Learning to read is an essential foundation for success in our society. Research shows that children who are not proficient readers by the end of 3rd grade perform poorly in other subjects and have difficulties throughout the course of their schooling. In a technological society, the demands for higher literacy are increasing steadily, creating more serious consequences for those persons who fall short.

The knowledge exists to teach all but a small percentage of students to become proficient readers. Despite this knowledge, a troubling number of children do not learn to read fluently enough to enjoy or engage in independent reading. According to the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test, the following percentages of students are rated as having "below basic" reading skills:

- 38% of 4th graders
- 26% of 8th graders
- 23% of 12th graders.



What do we know about how children learn to read? Why aren't all children learning to read successfully? What will it take to bridge the gap between classroom instructional practices and the research knowledge base on literacy development?

This issue of The Progress of Education Reform is designed to provide state policymakers with a concise overview of these and other crucial questions related to improving student reading achievement.

How well are students reading?

Results from the 1998 NAEP reading test show some improvement in reading achievement nationally since 1994. But the nation's students have far to go before they are reading at the level that NAEP considers "proficient." Only 31% of 4th graders, 33% of 8th graders and 40% of high school seniors reached that level last year.

The federally sponsored NAEP, which periodically tests students in core subjects, gave the 1998 reading test to a random sampling of 31,000 students in 1,400 public and private schools. Girls generally performed better than boys on the test, and private school students outscored their public school peers. On average, blacks and Hispanics are about three grade levels behind their white classmates. NAEP will test 4th graders' reading skills again next year and will assess all three grades again in 2002.

A state-by-state breakdown of the results of the 1998 reading assessment is available online at the National Education Goals Panel's Web site (www.negp.gov/readrpt.htm).

What accounts for Connecticut's success in improving student reading skills?

Connecticut had the highest reading achievement scores on the 1998 NAEP reading exam and is the most-improved state in reading scores since 1992.

Connecticut's success prompted the National Education Goals Panel to commission a study looking for lessons of policy and practice that might be applicable to other states. The study focused on 10 medium and large districts that had made the most improvement in reading achievement.

Researchers found that white, Hispanic and black students in Connecticut, across all socioeconomic levels, performed better than their counterparts in other states. The improvement in reading scores was not linked to average class size or length of the instructional day, the study concluded. The study, however, did establish a strong link between test results and classroom practices, including the following:

- A balanced reading program emphasizing both word-analysis skills and comprehension strategies, reinforced by systematic spelling programs and daily writing exercises.
- The use of ongoing assessments of reading ability.
- The early identification of children with delayed reading development and the use of a variety of intervention strategies.

The case study, Exploring High and Improving Reading Achievement in Connecticut, also identified several state policies that teachers and administrators in the 10 study districts felt had contributed most to local progress. The full report is available online at the goals panel's Web site (www.negp.gov/issues/publication/othpress/body.pdf).

Effective instruction requires multiple strategies

The way American schools teach children to read and write has been for many years under the influence of two divergent schools of thought: phonics and whole language. Phonics teaches children to dissect unfamiliar words into parts and then blend isolated sounds together to make a recognizable word. The whole-language method emphasizes reading for meaning and uses literature, rather than rules, as a teaching tool.

Over the past several years, a number of reports and studies have concluded that the best approach is a healthy balance between the two methods. Researchers say that children learn to read best if they first are given "phoneme awareness" training in the sounds of the English language and then taught the letter-sound relationships of traditional phonics. All along, teachers also should expose children to literature by reading to them and giving them interesting books, as in the whole-language method.

An extensive study sponsored by the National Research Council has produced two major reports examining factors that put children at risk of reading difficulties and exploring how literacy can be fostered from birth through kindergarten and the primary grades. The reports, Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children (1998) and Starting Out Right: A Guide to Promoting Children's Reading Success (1999), are available online at www.nap.edu/catalog/6023.html or by contacting the National Academy Press on its toll-free line, 888-624-8373.

Phonics

Whole-language

What should teachers of reading know and be able to do?

Although reading is the cornerstone of academic success, a single course in reading methods often is all that is offered most prospective teachers. According to the American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) 1999 report Teaching Reading Is Rocket Science, "the demands of competent reading instruction, and the training experiences necessary to learn it, have been seriously underestimated by universities and by those who approve licensing programs. The consequences for teachers and students alike have been disastrous." The AFT report says that new teachers require much more extensive, demanding and content-driven training if the lessons of research are to inform classroom practice.

The AFT report, which offers detailed recommendations on how to improve teacher education, professional development and classroom practice to support reading achievement, can be downloaded from the Web (www.aft.org) or obtained by calling AFT at 202-879-4400.

What can volunteer tutors contribute?

The Clinton administration's America Reads Challenge and other volunteer tutoring programs have helped generate public awareness about and involvement in literacy efforts, but most experts agree that such programs are not the key to solving children's reading problems.

Many researchers and reading experts contend that the task of teaching reading is a sophisticated one that should be attempted only by persons with experience in language instruction. Others say the millions of dollars allocated for America Reads – a federal initiative to build a corps of one million volunteer tutors – would be better spent on improved training for teachers in beginning-reading strategies.

Experts caution that even though many tutoring programs report positive outcomes for participating students, there are few reliable data to prove these claims. The National Research Council's recent reports (mentioned above) concluded that volunteer tutors "can provide very valuable practice and motivational support for children learning to read." But volunteers should not be used to provide primary or remedial instruction to children, the reports said, nor should they be expected "to deal effectively with children who have serious reading problems."

What can and should policymakers do?

Increasingly, researchers and educators are urging policymakers grappling with the issue of how to improve student reading performance to focus less on mandating a particular reading method and more on ensuring that elementary school teachers are prepared to choose among several approaches to help all children learn to read. They recommend that policy initiatives be directed toward (1) prevention, early diagnosis and intervention programs; (2) teacher preparation and professional development; and (3) reading standards and accountability.

An ECS policy brief entitled What Policymakers Need To Know About Student Reading provides background information on how children learn to read, clarifies what research says about effective instructional approaches and explores specific options available to policymakers. The policy brief is posted on the ECS Web site (www.ecs.org), along with a variety of other information, including:

- An up-to-date review of state policies and strategies focused on improving student reading performance
- A detailed analysis of 22 reading programs, including goals, philosophy, program components and evidence of effectiveness
- Research summaries, selected readings, "quick facts" and links to other useful Web sites.

This publication, the fourth in a series of bimonthly reports, is made possible by a grant from the GE Fund. The report was prepared by ECS Writer-Editor Suzanne Weiss.

GE Fund

The Progress of Education Reform 1999-2001 is available for $20.00 a year plus postage and handling. A year's subscription includes six bimonthly publications. Discounts are available for subsequent years. Ask for publication #SI-99-10.

Please order from the Education Commission of the States, 707 17th St. Suite 2700, Denver, CO 80202-3427; 303-299-3692; fax: 303-296-8332; e-mail: ecs@ecs.org. ECS accepts prepaid orders, Visa, MasterCard and American Express. All sales are final.

© Copyright 1999 by the Education Commission of the States (ECS). All rights reserved.

ECS is pleased to have other organizations and individuals share its materials with their constituents. To request permission to excerpt part of this publication either in print or electronically, please write or fax Josie Canales at the address above.

The Education Commission of the States is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate compact formed in 1965 to help governors, state legislators, state education officials and others develop policies to improve the quality of education.

It is ECS policy to take affirmative action to prevent discrimination in its policies, programs and employment practices.

Postage and handling charges if your order totals:

Up to $10.00 - $3.00
$10.01-$25.00 - $4.25
$25.01-$50.00 - $5.75
$50.01-$75.00 - $8.50
$75.01-$100.00 - $10.00
Over $100.01 - $12.00

Generous discounts are available for bulk orders of this publication. They are:

10-24 copies, 10% discount; 25-49 copies, 20% discount; 50-74 copies, 30% discount; 75-99 copies, 40% discount; and 100+ copies, 50% discount.